Civility and Incivility in the Workplace**


This study was a collaborative effort among the University of Baltimore’s Jacob France Institute, Johns Hopkins University, and four Baltimore business leaders. Four hundred employees, randomly chosen from four Baltimore area industries, were asked questions about incivility in their workplace. While a majority of the respondents believed that society as a whole is more uncivil now, only a quarter found that their own workplaces had become more uncivil. Overwhelmingly, workers stressed the importance of being employed in a civil workplace. The behaviors deemed "violent" included verbal abuses such as public criticism from a manager, use of profanity, or screaming at another employee. It appeared that women were the primary instigators of uncivil behavior, but three-quarters of the participants were female, which may have skewed the results. Clearly, however, women were the victims of incivility far more often than men. P. M. Forni contributed to research on this topic both as co-founder of the Johns Hopkins Civility Project and as author of the book *Choosing civility* (St. Martin’s Press, 2002). He feels that because the American workplace is so diverse, cultivating a civil environment is an essential business practice.


The authors attempt to draw a distinction between workplace incivility and workplace violence. They contend that social power theory as applied to workplace violence should be applied to workplace incivility, because exerting power over employees can lead to a rash of uncivil behavior. The authors point out that studies on the instigators of incivility are rare. Through a series of literature reviews and analyses of studies, the authors present three propositions. One is that minorities, women, and other employees with less power will experience more incivility. The second is that men and employees in positions of power will likely be the instigators. The third suggests that employees who experience incivility on the job will often have a negative image of their workplace and experience psychological and physical reactions.


Deckop, Cirka and Andersson's study examines the motivation for reciprocal behavior among employees. Emphasizing the maxim of the Golden Rule

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** Items on this list should be ordered directly from the publisher. Addresses are given in connection with each reference.
throughout, the authors attempt to discern the reasons for friendly interactions between co-workers in workplaces. They explain that there is little scientific proof of that commonly touted adage, but their study does indicate that positive behavior begets positive behavior, what they have termed the "virtuous cycle." Likewise, they surmise that negative behavior will invite the same in a "vicious cycle" and cite past studies that support their summation. While the authors readily admit that their pool was homogenous, mostly white educated women, they also feel that the results are telling. Managers can contribute to a civil atmosphere by initiating and rewarding "helping behavior."


Using over seven hundred subjects, including undergraduate and graduate students at a private northeastern university, Fritz attempts to address the question: "What categories of troublesome bosses, peers, and subordinates are invoked by persons in work environments?" Referring to impression formation literature and constructivist research, Fritz outlines some of the sources of "troublesome others." She explains that once a person forms a negative impression of a co-worker, it is difficult to change that impression. The common behaviors of an unpleasant relationship identified by all the participants are: sexual harassment; distracting, unprofessional focus of attention; being different from the respondent; and defensiveness. Though differences exist among each group, the overwhelming similarities include unprofessional, abrasive behavior. Fritz also found that power levels dramatically affect relationships, and, therefore, any misuse of power was seen as one of the worst possible traits among co-workers. According to Fritz, problematic relationships are not entirely without merit. Employees can often learn from them and even revise their own behavior from observing the effects of others' negative conduct.


Gardner and Johnson argue that workplace incivility is a serious problem that affects employees' mental and physical health and costs employers millions of dollars. Calling it "desk rage," the authors distinguish incivility from violence or sexual harassment, but acknowledge that it can escalate into more overtly abusive behaviors if not dealt with appropriately. They describe both direct and indirect costs of uncivil behavior to organizations. These include financial losses on both sides, as well as mental and physical effects ranging from depression to suicide. They place the onus to change uncivil behavior on the employers, urging them to take active steps to prevent it, intercede positively when it is occurring, and remedy situations that have already taken place by seeking solutions. While the authors suggest action that victims can take, they admit that many solutions can be detrimental to their job security. However, drawing on a 2000 legal decision in Massachusetts that awarded thousands of dollars in compensatory and punitive damages to an employee for behavior inflicted on her at work by the president of the company, Gardner and Johnson posit that it is becoming possible for abused employees to seek recompense, primarily by the "tort claim of intentional infliction of emotional distress (IIED)." They explain that it is still difficult to do legally, but expound upon David Yamada's law module, ("The
phenomenon of ‘workplace bullying’ and the need for status-blind hostile work environment protection” *Georgetown Law Journal*, March, 2000, pp.475-540), hoping this will eventually support employees in their cases.


Gonthier’s suggestions for implementing civility in the workplace are geared toward managers and workers alike. Beginning with a twentieth-century history of incivility in American society, the author brings the reader up to our current civility crisis. Chapter Two points out that incivility is costly to business, much like Ann C. Humphries emphasizes in “Rudeness: the hidden cost to business” (*Business and Economic Review*, Oct-Dec, 2000, pp.22-33). In Chapter Three, the author gives advice on how to teach a course in civility. Via work-oriented scenarios, Gonthier poses dilemmas and addresses them with a variety of solutions that promote improved employee relations. Chapter Five, written by Jill Bremer, an image trainer, addresses appearance issues including cultural differences that can cause difficulties. Chapter Six is directed at managers for resolving conflict. The final chapter is about implementing policy on civil behavior in the workplace. A sample survey and quiz are included in the back of the text.


While civil behavior cannot be outlined in a company manual, says Griffith, there are things that are legally defined and even some social guidelines that exist in written policies. However, many managers are loath to discuss in detail anything outside of these realms. Still, workplaces benefit in a variety of ways when they “peek out from behind the manual” and address civil, and uncivil, behavior in their organizations. He defines three sections of civility: laws (what we must do), laws combined with policies (what we will do), and laws combined with policies as well as other civility standards (what we should do). He encourages managers to identify and deal with uncivil behavior in all forms, particularly in areas where the policy books do not prescribe the rules. Another article on civility from the same issue, (“Building a more respectful workplace environment” by Ronald Placone and Lola Komisin, pp. 7-10), reports on a “Model for Fostering Respect” that was developed for the workplace.


Hodson’s article augments research on organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) with the newer concept of management citizenship behavior (MCB). MCB is defined as “behavior that conforms to prevailing norms for organizational leadership and for respecting workers’ rights.” Hodson explains that workplaces are demanding more of workers, often without compensation or acknowledgement. There are several ways that managers can gain the attention of and sustain the loyalty of employers: trust, legitimacy, reciprocity, and organizational justice. If there is a concerted effort towards implementing MCB, potential results could include “employee citizenship behavior,” conflict resolution between managers and employees, and a reduction in teamwork conflicts.
This study reiterates a common finding that managers tend to behave more poorly with their female and minority subordinates. He emphasizes the need for distributing power to encourage increased employee productivity.


In this article, Hornstein focuses on the behavior of management towards subordinates. He argues that because managers want to remain in “The Boss Club,” they often behave in ways that they think will ensure their elevated positions, though this is ultimately detrimental to the organization. He believes that it is human nature to “boost the status of me and we at the expense of they” and therefore assumes that incivility will never be eradicated. He does, however, think there are steps that can be taken to reduce negative behavior and supplies solutions in the form of the “three R’s of organizational life: Rewards, Respect, and Recognition.” Three other articles in this issue specifically address workplace incivility. “Emotions in the workplace and the important role of toxin handlers” by Peter J. Frost emphasizes the importance of managerial civility and fairness to overall workplace productivity and health. (Frost published more of his research in a monograph, Toxic emotions at work: how compassionate managers handle pain and conflict (Harvard Business School Press, 2003)). Gary Namie’s “Workplace bullying: escalated incivility” attempts to put “bullying” on the same level as racial discrimination and sexual harassment, and provides some useful tools to employers on how to lessen the behavior in their organizations. Edward E. Lawler focuses on the reward system to improve employee relations in “What it means to treat people right.”


The authors present the case that incivility in the workplace is just as harmful and costly at times as harsher forms of behavior such as outward aggression and violence. They want to understand how workplace incivility is situated in the larger scheme of workplace interpersonal relationships. Using a vast cross-section of employment situations derived from data they collected for three years, the authors develop a definition of workplace incivility which includes: “low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target.” Subjects in the study regarded incivility as divisive at best; some even considered the behavior immoral. While aggression is usually linked with intent, the authors found that with uncivil behavior it is often not clear whether the instigator was consciously trying to cause harm. However, they warn that incivility could escalate to aggression, and inaction on the part of management has dangerous and potentially expensive repercussions. Pearson and Andersson have collaborated on this topic several times, and their article “Tit for tat? The spiraling effect of incivility in the workplace” (Academy of Management Review, 1999, vol. 24, pp. 452-471) is highly cited in the literature about workplace civility.